



**U.S. Department of Justice
United States Attorney
District of Kansas**

**NEWS
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Eric Melgren, U.S. Attorney

Contact: Jim Cross

(316) 269-6481

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Headquarters
1200 Epic Center
301 N. Main
Wichita, Kansas 67202
(316)269-6481
FAXES (316)269-6484

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**WICHITA AREA GUN TASK FORCE AIMS TO PUT ARMED CRIMINALS BEHIND
BARS FOR LONGER**

WICHITA, Kan. – President George W. Bush said: "If you use a gun illegally you will do hard time." A new federal, state and local task force based in Wichita is targeting violent drug offenders and career criminals who use firearms unlawfully. Defendants prosecuted under federal firearms laws face longer jail sentences – and no parole.

"We're sending the word to the streets," said U.S. Attorney Eric Melgren, who is overseeing the task force initiative. "There have been federal laws on the books for years that prohibit felons from possessing firearms and give judges the authority to come down hard on criminals who carry guns when they commit crimes. In the past, violations of these laws were not always aggressively prosecuted. The mission of our task force is to investigate and prosecute violations of federal gun laws, and by exposing the worst gun offenders to long federal sentences, to make our neighborhoods safer."

Federal prosecutors from Melgren's office will work with agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, the Wichita Police Department and the Sedgwick County Sheriff's office to build cases for prosecution in federal courts. Federal laws are tough on the unlawful use of a firearm. For example:

- Mere possession of a firearm after a felony conviction is a federal crime, and can subject the offender to sentences of several years, even if the possessed firearm was not being used in a crime.

- Mere possession of a firearm after even a misdemeanor conviction for domestic violence is also a federal crime, again exposing the possessor to lengthy jail sentences.
- Possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime carries a mandatory minimum penalty of five years in federal prison.
- Displaying a firearm during a robbery increases the mandatory minimum sentence to seven years, even if the firearm was not discharged.
- Discharging a firearm during a robbery increases the mandatory minimum penalty to ten years.
- A crime spree of just a few offenses using a firearm can trigger a mandatory minimum sentence of twenty-five years.

"All the partners must work together to make the Wichita Area Gun Task Force successful," Melgren said. "No one agency is likely to have a significant and lasting impact on gun crime. By working together, though, we will reduce gun crime and make this community safer."

The federal Project Safe Neighborhoods program is contributing \$414,000 over two years to support the task force. Each of the partners will contribute personnel to the Gun Task Force:

- ATF will assign five full-time agents.
- The U.S. Attorney's office will provide a full-time prosecutor.
- The Kansas Bureau of Investigation will assign six part-time agents.
- The Wichita Police Department will assign one full-time officer.
- The Sedgwick County Sheriff's Department will assign one full-time officer.

Wichita Police Chief Norman Williams had this to say: "This task force represents a partnership that can make a real difference in our community's safety by taking criminals in possession of weapons off our streets and keeping them in prison for longer periods of time. The Wichita Police Department is pleased to have this additional tool to hold criminals accountable for their actions."

Sedgwick County Sheriff Gary Steed said: "I am pleased to partner with federal, state and local law enforcement to make our communities safer. This provides us with an effective method to focus and leverage our resources to increase prosecution and secure convictions in violent and firearm-related crimes."

KBI Director Larry Welch said: "The KBI is pleased to join with the U.S. Attorney, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the Wichita Police Department, the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office and the Project Safe Neighborhoods Program in this task force. Kansas continues to be a model for law enforcement cooperation and this multi-agency effort is yet another example of that cooperation."

Tom Atteberry, resident agent in charge of the Wichita field office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives, said: "The task force will continue to expand on the outstanding working relationships we have fostered with our state and local law enforcement partners in order to reduce violent gun crime. The task force will not only be working in the Wichita area, but 67 other surrounding counties as well. ATF is confident that by aggressively investigating, arresting and prosecuting violent gun offenders we will make our area communities safer to live in."

The task force will cover more than half the counties in Kansas, mainly in the western and southern parts of the state. Similar task forces already are in place in Topeka and Kansas City. The task force will have four priority targets:

- Offenders under the age of 26 and are gang members, who commit a disproportionate number of gun crimes.
- Offenders who use a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime.
- Offenders who use a gun to commit a crime after being convicted of a crime and prohibited from possessing a firearm.
- Offenders who commit serial robberies.

Project Safe Neighborhoods is a national initiative launched by the Bush administration in 2001 with the goal of reducing the incidence of gun crimes and increasing the number of federal prosecutions for gun violations. As part of the initiative, the Project Safe Neighborhood program in Kansas has provided special training for more than 1,000 state and local law enforcement officers during the past 2 ½ years.

Prosecutors are expecting the task force to produce a heavy caseload. "We're just starting and the investigators have already got 40 or 50 cases they're working on," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Matt Treaster, who will be working with the task force.